

2 Panthers alter plea in New Haven

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Two members of the New Haven Panther 14 have pleaded guilty and a third has testified for the state.

These developments took place last week as superior court judge Aaron Palmer heard evidence on the request of five of the accused for bail. He reserved decision.

The 14 Black Panther party members have been held without bail since May—all accused of participating in the murder of Alex Rackley, 25. The state alleges the Panthers tortured and killed Rackley, a party member, for being a police informer. The party denies the murder and maintains Rackley was a member in good standing.

Party chairman Bobby Seale, currently serving four years in jail for contempt of court stemming from the Chicago trial of the Conspiracy 8, was charged in the New Haven case in August and is in a California prison awaiting a hearing on whether to extradict him to Connecticut.

Seale was named in the indictment by George Sams Jr., 23, who was arrested in Toronto early in August. The Panther party insists Sams is actually the police informer and that he is part of a government conspiracy to frame the other New Haven defendants.

Sams, as expected, pleaded guilty to second degree murder Dec. 1. The second confession—for conspiracy to commit kidnapping—was made by Loretta Lukes, 22, who is eight months pregnant and who has been held in prison under deplorable conditions for the last six months. She originally pleaded innocent. Defendant Jeanie Wilson, 16, at first refused to testify but later, under threat of being sent to jail until she was 21 if she remained silent, decided to turn state's evidence. Her testimony did not include any statements about torture or murder.

Rackley was allegedly kidnapped by party members, subjected to a kangaroo trial, tortured, murdered and dumped into a swamp in Middlefield, Conn., May 21.

None of the five Panthers seeking bail or the six others who did not seek the bail right have confessed to any crime.

A bail hearing is called for under Connecticut law in a capital case when the prosecution and judge agree bail should be denied.

In order to have bail denied when challenged, the state must demonstrate "the proof is evident and the presumption against the defendant great." Under these conditions, the state can use a bail hearing to produce any evidence—even when highly questionable—for the record. Thus, even if the prosecution relies on the testimony of unreliable police agents or persons they have forced to testify (which is what the Panthers charge about the evidence in this case) a bail hearing is an opportunity for the state to reveal such testimony for later use—before witnesses change their minds or repudiate confessions acquired under duress.

During the 11-day bail hearing the prosecution played two

tape recordings which implied death. The defense argued the identification of voices is unseized.

Since he was only presiding the judge admitted the tapes.

When finally played—the tapes to the press for months—were vague and suspicious in nature. "My name is Ericka Huggins," alleged interrogation of Rackley much purported questioning that Rackley (or the voice allegedly had been tortured or that is also not explained satisfactorily have incriminated herself so did.

The Panthers charge the tapes.

Miss Lukes, brought to the attention of the judge for her amazing ability to identify two words—even though she had a brief period before her arrest several of the voices.

Commenting on her testimony "Loretta Lukes has been kept in the last six months. We say she is intimidated."

Speaking of Sams' confession July Sams was exposed as a liar August on the basis of Sams' remarks was ousted from the party in August at the request of another Panther. 22, Seale stated that "Sams is a murderer this person."

The two other defendants were Maude Francis, 15 and M. they can be held indefinitely until 21.

Maude Francis, put on the stand sent back to jail, which could not mention possible sentence trial.

Miss Wilson also refused to testify—perhaps in fear of sharing her testimony, for all the party's torture, trial, murder, or anything.

Throughout the bail hearing because it could not—for strategy defendants on the stand to court.

Commenting on the hearing the party, the Panther spokesman are Black Panthers, as long as there is a Black Panther party."